



Multiple Victim Homicides, Mass Murders, and Homicide-Suicides as Domestic Violence Events

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While intimate partner homicides are generally discussed as events in which there is a single homicide victim, they often involve multiple homicide victims and even the homicide offender's suicide. These additional homicide victims are often the children of the targeted intimate partner, though they are also other family members, friends, acquaintances, or others. Sometimes the number of people killed in an intimate partner homicide event reaches four or more, crossing the Federal Bureau of Investigation's threshold of four deaths for classifying it as a mass murder (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005). In fact, using this four-fatality definition, the typical mass murder is one that is committed with a gun and involves family member victims and a history of relationship conflict. While the majority of intimate partner homicides are committed with guns, the proportion committed with guns is higher when there are multiple victims and offender suicides. This is undoubtedly due, in part, to the lethality of guns.

This paper will explore multiple victim intimate partner homicides, including mass murders, and intimate partner homicide-suicides, regardless of number of homicide victims. It will briefly cover how often they occur, the frequency of firearm use in these homicides, relationship-related circumstances under which they occur (such as separation and domestic violence), possible explanations for why they occur, and opportunities for intervention, including firearm restrictions. Importantly, this is not a comprehensive examination of all possible risk factors for multiple victim intimate partner homicides or intimate partner homicide-suicides; it is a focused discussion of domestic violence, separation, and gun use.

A note on gender: Men commit the majority of intimate partner homicides (Fox & Fridel, 2017), intimate partner homicides with multiple victims, including children (Liem & Reichelmann, 2014; Smucker, Kerber, & Cook, 2018; Wilson, Daly, & Daniele, 1995), intimate partner homicides followed by suicide, with or without child victims (Holland, Brown, Hall, & Logan, 2018; Knoll & Hatters-Friedman, 2015; Lund & Smorodinsky, 2001), and mass murders (Fridel, 2018; Taylor, 2018). The majority of intimate partners killed are female (Fox & Fridel, 2017; Holland et al., 2018; Knoll & Hatters-Friedman, 2015; Liem & Reichelmann, 2014; Lund & Smorodinsky, 2001; Smucker et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 1995). Therefore, I refer to the homicide offender with masculine pronouns and the victim with feminine pronouns throughout this paper.

Prevalence

Most people know that intimate partner homicides are events in which someone kills their current or former spouse, dating partner, cohabitant, or person with whom they have a child. What people less commonly know is that intimate partner homicides often include multiple homicide victims. The non-intimate partner victims have been coworkers, friends, new partners of the targeted intimate partners, strangers, police officers and, most commonly, the children or family members of the targeted intimate partner (Dobash & Dobash, 2012; Smith, Fowler, & Niolon, 2014; Smucker et al., 2018). A study of 16 states from 2003 through 2009 found that 4,470 people were killed in 3,350 intimate partner homicide events, ranging from one to seven deaths per event (Smith et al., 2014). Forty-nine percent of these additional victims were children or other family members of the targeted intimate partner, 27% were new intimate

partners of the targeted intimate partner, 20% were friends of the targeted intimate partner, 4% were strangers, and 1% were police officers called to the scene (Smith et al., 2014). Many of these additional victims died because they were present at the time of the intimate partner homicide, and some attempted to intervene or protect the victim (Smith et al., 2014).

Estimates suggest that 6 to 20% of all intimate partner homicides involve multiple homicide victims (Smith et al., 2014; Smucker et al., 2014; Yousuf et al., 2017). In North Carolina, from 2004 through 2013, 40 incidents of intimate partner homicide included two homicide victims, 10 incidents included 3 victims, and one case involved 4 homicide victims, making it a mass murder (Smucker et al., 2018). Thirty-five percent of these non-intimate partner victims were the children of the targeted intimate partner (Smucker et al., 2018). In fact, the killing of an intimate partner and her children (often termed *familicide*) is the most common type of multiple victim intimate partner homicide. It is estimated that 23 familicides are committed each year in the United States (Liem, Levin, Holland, & Fox, 2013), and most are committed with guns (Liem & Reichelmann, 2014).

Contrary to the portrayal of mass murders in the media as largely being committed in public places by strangers, familicides constitute half of mass murders in the U.S. (Fridel, 2018). These familicides sometimes include the killing of parents, siblings, or other close relatives and are most commonly committed with guns by middle-aged white males who are the husbands and fathers of their victims (Fridel, 2018). In fact, from 2007 through 2011, 43% of mass murders involved only victims who were family members of the homicide offender, while 26% involved a combination of victim types (Taylor, 2018). Children were killed in 49% of the 156 family mass murders that occurred from 2006 through 2016, making children more likely to die in family mass murders than mass murders committed in public (11% of which involved child deaths) and those committed in the context of a separate felony crime (21% of which involved child deaths) (Fridel, 2018).

Often in the context of an intimate partner homicide or familicide, the homicide offender will commit suicide. While homicide-suicides are relatively uncommon in general, suicides following intimate partner homicides are more common. Indeed, the most common type of homicide-suicide is an intimate partner homicide committed by the male partner against the female partner in the context of separation or threatened separation, followed by the male partner's suicide (Knoll & Hatters-Friedman, 2015). Roughly 5% of all homicides involve offender suicide (Barber et al., 2008; Smucker et al., 2018); however, estimates suggest that 20% to 59% of all intimate partner homicides are followed by the offender's suicide (Banks, Crandall, Sklar, & Bauer, 2008; Barber et al., 2008; Lund & Smorodinsky, 2001; Morton, Runyan, Moracco, & Butts, 1998; Smucker et al., 2018; Yousuf et al., 2017). One study of all 116 homicide-suicide events with female homicide victims in North Carolina from 1988 through 1992 found that 83% were perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner, and that these represented 27% of all intimate partner homicides in North Carolina at that time (Morton et al., 1998). Intimate partner homicide-suicides may also include child homicide victims. For example, of 724 intimate partner homicide-suicides from all 50 states from 1999 through 2004, 23% included at least one

child victim while 21% of cases in which the couple had multiple children involved the deaths of all the children (Sillito & Salari, 2011).

Guns and multiple victim intimate partner homicides and mass murders

While there are often precipitating circumstances and a history of conflict prior to someone committing an intimate partner homicide, multiple victim intimate partner homicide, or mass murder, one of the most common elements is that the offender had access to a gun and used it to kill. When an abusive male partner has access to a gun, it increases the risk of him killing his female partner by 400% (Campbell et al., 2003). This may be due, at least in part, to the lethality of guns: guns are simply deadlier than other weapons. In fact, domestic violence that involves a gun is more likely to end in a homicide than domestic violence that involves any other weapon (Saltzman, Mercy, O'Carroll, Rosenberg, & Rhodes, 1992). Guns can be used at a distance in a way other weapons simply cannot: the attacker need not be close enough to make physical contact in the way required to stab, bludgeon, or choke his victim; instead he may be several feet away or more from his victim.

Over half of all intimate partner homicides are committed with guns (Fox & Fridel, 2017; Smucker et al., 2014), but the percentage of intimate partner homicide-related killings committed with guns seems to increase when there are additional victims. Estimates suggest that guns are used in almost three-quarters of intimate partner homicides with multiple victims (Smith et al., 2014; Smucker et al., 2014). In fact, one study found that intimate partner homicide offenders are twice as likely to commit a multiple homicide when a gun is used than when they use other means to commit homicide (Smucker et al., 2014).

The majority of mass murders, whether familicide or not, involve the use of guns. Taylor (2018) reports that 65% of mass murders were committed exclusively with guns between 2007 and 2011, while an additional 13% of mass murderers used a combination of weapons. Using a larger time frame, from 2006 through 2016, Fridel (2018) reports that 68% of family mass murderers, 69% of felony murderers, and 73% of public mass murderers used guns to kill.

The use of a gun to commit the intimate partner homicide also increases the likelihood of the offender committing suicide, with one researcher declaring that "among men who kill their female partners with a firearm, homicide-suicide is the norm" (Barber et al., 2008, p. 293). Guns are used in 61% to 89% of intimate partner homicide-suicides (Banks et al., 2008; Koziol-McLain et al., 2006; Smucker et al., 2018). Two studies found that when intimate partner homicides were committed by men with guns, suicide followed in 46% to 56% of cases, but when it was committed by men without guns, suicide followed in only 7% to 13% of cases (Lund & Smorodinsky, 2001; Smucker et al., 2018). A multivariate analysis found that suicide was almost 10 times as likely when a gun was used as when a different weapon was used. However, this finding does not extend to women who kill their intimate partners: women rarely committed suicide, regardless of weapon used (Smucker et al., 2018). Male abusers' access to guns

increases the risk of intimate partner homicide-suicide over the risk of nonfatal abuse (Koziol-McLain et al., 2006).

Theoretical perspectives

There are multiple theoretical perspectives on why intimate partner homicides, including multiple victim homicides and homicide-suicides, occur. Theoretical perspectives attempt to explain a phenomenon (in this case, intimate partner homicide) broadly. While not all intimate partner homicides or familicides are committed by men (some are, indeed, committed by women), the vast majority are committed by men, and theories on their occurrence are often based on the premise that the male is the offender. One such perspective is termed male proprietariness theory.

Male proprietariness theory derives from the field of evolutionary psychology which seeks to explain, from an evolutionary perspective, why we behave in certain ways. In this case, male proprietariness theory rests on the fact that while women are always certain that children are biologically theirs, males face greater uncertainty given their limited role in reproduction (Wilson et al., 1995). To ensure that any children born are biologically their children, men may take ownership of their female partner's sexuality, and correspondingly limit their freedom (Wilson et al., 1995). This may not be done consciously. This sense of proprietariness, or ownership, over a female partner may lead to a desire to control that partner, which could manifest as domestic violence. The goal of domestic violence, in fact, is control over one's partner (Stark, 2007). If this control is threatened somehow, it is possible that an abuser will resort to lethal violence to reassert that control.

According to male proprietariness theory, men may kill their intimate partners in response to events that suggest that their partners may take new sexual companions, including separation or divorce (Wilson et al., 1995). This theory is consistent with the fact that many intimate partner homicides, multiple victim intimate partner homicides, and intimate partner homicide-suicides are committed around the time of separation (Campbell et al., 2007; Holland et al., 2018; Knoll & Hatters-Friedman, 2015; Koziol-McLain et al., 2006; Morton et al., 1998; Taylor, 2018). Male proprietariness theory also suggests that if a man doubts that he is the biological father of the children or the children are from a previous relationship, he may be more likely to kill both his intimate partner and children (Wilson et al., 1995).

In cases in which children are killed, the homicidal intimate partner may view the children as extensions of their mother, whom he believes he has lost power over or been wronged by (Liem & Reichelmann, 2014; Sillito & Salari, 2011; Wilson et al, 1995). Intimate partner homicide offenders who kill their children have been described as incredibly controlling of their partners or even "tyrannical" (Liem & Reichelmann, 2014). This depiction of a controlling homicide offender is consistent with Stark's (2007) view of intimate partner violence as being about the control of one's partner and Wilson and colleague's (1995) description of male proprietariness. When the offender kills his children as extensions of his intimate partner (often

in addition to killing his intimate partner) it is known as a murder-by-proxy familicide (Fridel, 2018; Liem & Reichelmann, 2014; Websdale, 2010).

It is believed that the primary motive behind familicides is not always homicide; sometimes it is the offender's wish to commit suicide (Sillito & Salari, 2011). Suicidality may be a risk factor for familicides; however, these suicidal familicide offenders may not have a known history of intimate partner violence (Websdale, 2010). Instead of a desire to take revenge for loss of control over their intimate partners, as in murder-by-proxy cases, those who commit suicide-by-proxy may believe they are saving their family from a worse fate (Websdale, 2010).

Suicide-by-proxy offenders may believe that they are the leaders of their families, that only they can provide for or take care of their families, and that their families would be lost without them. If they fail in taking care of their families, perhaps through financial or other difficulties or through separation or divorce, they may become suicidal and kill their family members as if killing extensions of themselves (Liem & Reichelmann, 2014). They may see these homicides as saving their families from a terrible future without them (Wilson et al., 1995). Evolutionary psychology also has an explanation for suicidal familicide offenders: Those who are suicidal are no longer looking after their best interests in terms of their evolutionary imperative to reproduce and protect their offspring, and therefore are more willing to kill their offspring and their mate (Wilson et al., 1995). Additionally, male proprietariness may be displayed in suicide-by-proxy cases as the homicide offender feeling "entitled to decide his victims' fates" (Wilson et al., 1995, p. 289).

An alternative perspective on homicide-suicide suggests that the offender's feelings of guilt and remorse about the homicide prompt him to take his life (Stack, 1997). This suggests that the offender was not initially suicidal, instead he was homicidal, and the horror of the homicide drove him to suicide. However, the presence of evidence suggesting the suicide was premeditated (discussed below) in many of these homicide-suicides suggests that this is often not the case (Koziol-McLain et al., 2006). Indeed it suggests that the suicide, and likely the murder, was planned (Podlogar, Gai, Schneider, Hagan, & Joiner, 2018).

Circumstances

Multiple victim intimate partner homicide and intimate partner homicide-suicide commonly occur during or after separation and offenders often have a history of intimate partner "problems," including violence, child custody issues, and arguments. The vast majority of multiple victim intimate partner homicides are committed in private homes (Smith et al., 2014). The homicide offender targets his intimate partner and also often kills those who were simply at the home at the time, and who sometimes tried to intervene in the homicide (Smith et al., 2014). Over half of those who kill their families commit suicide after the homicides (Liem & Reichelmann, 2014).

Similar to single victim intimate partner homicides, many familicides and intimate partner homicide-suicides (with or without child victims) occur in the context of separation or the threat of separation. In a study of 175 homicide-suicides with child victims (with or without adult victims), 25% of the cases involved separation or divorce, and 17% involved child custody problems (Holland et al., 2018). A study of 12 intimate partner homicide-suicides in Dallas, Texas, revealed that each of these cases had occurred in the context of separation (Knoll & Hatters-Friedman, 2015), and in a study of 99 intimate partner homicide-suicides (with or without additional family member victims), there was evidence of a recent separation in 41% of cases (Morton et al., 1998). Finally, in a multivariate analysis, separation more than doubled the risk of intimate partner homicide-suicide over nonfatal abuse (Koziol-McLain et al., 2006).

Separation or divorce also preceded 22% of mass murders from 2007 through 2011, often with a long history of conflict in the relationship prior to the separation (Taylor, 2018). In fact, 38% of mass murders are those in which intimate partners, children, or other family members are killed due to “relationship issues” which included domestic violence and arguments (Taylor, 2018). A similar study of mass murders found a history of domestic violence present in 29% of family mass murders. “Family difficulties,” defined as separation, divorce, or child custody issues, were present in 46% of family mass murders (Fridel, 2018). It is important to note that some cases without known domestic violence will have involved domestic violence. This is because roughly 44% of domestic violence victimizations are not reported to the police (Reaves, 2017), and it is through justice system involvement that these cases often become “known.”

Taylor (2018) compared mass murderers who committed their homicides from 2007 through 2011 by motive and found that those whose motives were “relationship issues,” such as domestic violence and arguments, were most likely to kill family members than strangers or acquaintances. In only one case did a mass murderer with a “relationship issue” motivation kill strangers, but this was because he could not find his intended target – his wife (Taylor, 2018). Similarly, Fridel (2018) found that 29% of those who committed family mass murders had a history of domestic violence, while 46% had “romantic and familial difficulties,” which could include separation or divorce and child custody problems, and 26% had a violent criminal record.

Intimate partner violence, more diffuse intimate partner problems, and child custody problems characterize many familicides. Using news reports, Liem & Reichelmann (2014) conducted an in-depth analysis of 238 familicides, including those that did not involve children’s and intimate partners’ deaths (for example, cases in which parents and siblings are killed). Eighty percent of these cases involved intimate partner problems (although the researchers failed to define what this meant), 29% involved restraining orders, and 17% involved child custody problems. These intimate partner problems and restraining orders remained common even when intimate partners were not killed in the familicides (Liem & Reichelmann, 2014).

Interestingly, in a study of intimate partner homicide-suicides in all states from 1999 through 2004, results suggested that intimate partner homicide-suicides were less likely to involve child victims when the homicide occurred after the couple had separated or divorced. In other

words, children were more likely to be killed in intact relationships (Sillito & Salari, 2011). This research, however, was not able to assess whether separation had been threatened in intact relationships prior to the homicide-suicide event. The authors tracked whether children were present and killed, present but not killed (ie, witnessed the homicide), or not present during the homicide. They suggest that whether children were killed depended on whether they were present at the homicide. Children with separated parents were less likely to be there when the homicide occurred than children whose parents were still together (Sillito & Salari, 2011).

Another study that examined homicide-suicides characterized a “spousal revenge filicides” homicide-suicide, in which a father kills at least one of his children and then himself, but leaves his intimate partner alive. These cases have domestic violence motives; for example, one father killed his daughter to punish his ex-wife for seeking custody (Knoll & Hatters-Friedman, 2015). In fact, a study of homicide-suicides, with or without adult victims, from 18 states found that over 60% involved intimate partner problems, including known intimate partner violence (25% of cases) (Holland et al., 2018). Of those cases with known intimate partner violence, 9% involved criminal charges of domestic violence and 8% involved domestic violence restraining orders (Holland et al., 2018). Similarly, 20% of cases of intimate partner homicide-suicide in North Carolina from 1988 through 1992 exhibited evidence of prior domestic violence (Morton et al., 1998). In 31% of cases of intimate partner homicide-suicide without additional family member victims, there was evidence of a conflict within the two weeks before the homicide-suicide that may have precipitated it. Otherwise, there was evidence of domestic violence in 34% of these cases (Morton et al., 1988).

Signs of premeditation and implications

Overall, signs of premeditation are quite common in familicides, with and without offender suicide. In the Liem & Reichelmann (2014) study, 70% of familicides (including those without intimate partner victims) involved signs of premeditation, which included written or verbal threats or warnings. While sometimes these threats and warnings occurred shortly before the homicide, in other cases they occurred days before (Holland et al., 2018). This suggests that, for some, there may be time to intervene.

For example, in a small sample of intimate partner homicide-suicides in Dallas, Texas, the majority of offenders had indicated their plans prior to the event: 67% of offenders were known to have made verbal threats and 8% wrote a note (Knoll & Hatters-Friedman, 2015). Additionally, of homicide-suicides with child victims (regardless of whether these involved intimate partner victims or motivations), 40% indicated their plans through verbal threats or a note but, importantly, many of these disclosures were made directly before the homicide and did not afford enough time for intervention (Holland et al., 2018). Forty-one percent of those who disclosed their intent did so days before the killing, however there was no evidence that anyone tried to intervene (Holland et al., 2018). In a study that compared risk factors for intimate partner homicide-suicide versus nonfatal physical abuse, threats of suicide more than doubled the risk (Koziol-McLain et al., 2006).

These threats, if made in advance, provide an opportunity for intervention. Even when threats are not directly made, there are risk factors and warning signs that can be used to take precautions. The warning signs discussed in this paper are abuser's access to a gun, threats of suicide or homicide, intimate partner violence, separation or divorce, and child custody problems. Given the risks posed by an abuser with a gun, and that the majority of these homicides are committed with guns, interventions that prevent access to guns are called for. Additionally, as stated so well by Smucker and colleagues: "As suicidal batterers will not be deterred from [intimate partner homicide] by threat of punishment, the results [of this research] underline the importance of preemption by limiting batterers' access to guns" (Smucker et al., 2018, p. 337).

Access to guns can be limited in two main ways. The first is through the use of civil domestic violence restraining orders, which may carry firearm purchase and possession restrictions for the period that the order is in place. The second way is through criminal conviction. All felony convictions carry firearm restrictions with them, but so do misdemeanor crimes of domestic violence and, in some states, misdemeanor crimes for violence in general. Additionally, while in a minority of states, red flag laws, which allow law enforcement to remove firearms from someone's possession during a period of high risk for suicide or violence towards others, may also be used to prevent intimate partner homicide, multiple victim intimate partner homicide, and intimate partner homicide-suicide. For information on these legal restrictions and evidence on their effectiveness in reducing homicide, please see [<hyperlink to updated Research on Statutory Interventions June 2018 paper>](#).

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